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THE DIAMOND SHOAL LIGHTSHIP

BY AMY LOWELL

Down from the notched peaks of the Great Smoky Mountains, where painted Indians slipped between the fir-trees following a trail of dropped stones chipped six-sided for a guide—

Down across the level miles which range out below the mountains, to the forty notes of a grey mocking-bird singing in a bald cedar—

Down through the hissing marshes of bright-tongued reeds, with a musk-rat nuzzling along the waterways, smelling out a nest, sucking the eggs, diving under a tuft of weather-logged grass.

Across water, not sweet, not salt, with a plover piping overhead—piping—flying—settling on a sand-bar:—

Heaved out of the sea, holding back the salt of the sea, shimmering with eel-grass, shoaling into yellow water, tossing up the folding water, diving and rising for eight good miles, drifting lower, settling to sleep cuddled under the drawn-up water, smiling because a ship cannot see it, chuckling in little continuous ripples when the tide ebbs, close-nosed, breathing deeply, heaving in sleep when the tide makes—

Bright as a cut diamond, yellow as a canary diamond, blue as the under-light in a faceted stone, green with the slant rays jetted up from the foot of a deep stone—

The Diamond Shoal, spilling water out of its hollows and ridges, drying in the sun, printing under the little running feet of terns and sand-pipers, furrowed in zig-zag lines by the tails of horse-shoe crabs.

Out of the sand jut the eyes and spines of sting-rays, and minnows and shrimps bustle down the water-lanes.

In the green Spring evenings, the drum-fish rattle at the mouths of inlets, calling to the female, calling the song of eggs to be laid; and in the live oaks, beyond the sweet-water Sound, the cardinal grosbeak sings to the purple-shooting dawn, the song of eggs in grey moss, of new birds to fly away with the old when Autumn blows a clear wind upon the rice-fields.

So it was when Indians paddled log canoes, far out at sea, skirting the shoal, growling at the bright shoal, hurrying their paddles through the water.

So it was when the tea-clippers from Boston and New York cut through deep water with yards trimmed Westerly and even the sky-sails stretched and bellied, giving the shoal a wide berth; and so when they returned, torn and frazzled by the yawing Cape winds, and the parrots in the rigging scented land and the running sap in the sweet gums and screeched and flapped their dusty pink wings.

So it was when the whalers of New Bedford beat to sea; and so when they wallowed back again, reeking with whale-oil, keeping a weather-eye to leeward, cursing Cape Hatteras, praying for a moonlight night.

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Out of the grey cap of the sky dropped the wind.

Out of the storm-coloured sky snarled the sudden wind, and the heaped waves ran under it, snorting.

They fell upon the shoal, they wormed upon it, drawing their bellies over its ridges. They reared up above the shoal, spotted green and white like Etruscan marble, they hollowed over themselves like cornices of marble, they bent, drooped, hung, and crashed upon the sand, sucking back, mouthing and retreating, slobbered with foam. Crack on the shoal, waves and waves, yeasting with froth, hard green and indigo shells, shocked, broken, spilling grey spume.

The Diamond Shoal hidden under pillars of water, laughing under crawling roofs of water, catching at the keels of ships, creeping up the rudder blades, playing with the bodies of the men who sailed them.

Out of the South rose the long winds, and from the North clanged the thunder-winds, and through the sand was drawn a fibre of ships' timbers, and snails clung to the thigh-bones of drowned men.

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Then they came with mallets and chisels. They sailed over the sweet water loaded gunwale-deep with bricks. They fetched lime and mortar in wide-lipped barges, and stopped for dinner, eating pork-sandwiches out of tin dinner-pails and smoking "lemon yellow" tobacco in the shade of the pile they had already begun.

Beyond them, on the shoaling sands, red-breasted snipe sprang up in the air with loud twirling whistles, and spotted sandpipers skimmed the star-ripples crying "weet, weet, weet."

The sand shifted a little, moving to the fingers of the water, shifted and bided its time.

So it grew, pulsing up at the sky. Every day a heart-beat higher, pointing at the wedges of geese honking overhead in the Spring, flying North; staring at the South-Southerly ducks, as they chattered and flew, steering for the inlets of the Santee River in Autumn.

Up, up, spiralled black and white, a twist-coloured tube of sweetness, a sweet light upon a bitter ocean, and the waves on the Diamond Shoal curled their tails into the sand and wriggled in green contortions, crinkling in the sunlight, laughing in derision, eight miles out to sea.

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Then the men with the tin dinner-pails and the clay pipes black with lemon tobacco came again. Came sweeping out of Norfolk navy-yard, escorting a scarlet steamship with no bowsprit and a narrow platform round each mast.

The screw of the scarlet ship turned against the wave-hollows. The thick flukes struck the huddled water and pushed it sideways.

The forefoot of the vessel bit through the undulating sea with the sharp noise of a burring wheel.

Fan—push—cut—and forward. Scarlet reflections smothered in over-sliding green. Black smoke wedging out like a marching goose-flock. Land winds thick with the tang of young pine-cones, and a corrugated patch of steel-white water where the bobble of a school of skip-jacks sets innumerable ripples chipping across the surface of the sea.

A scarlet ship to forestall a dim grey destiny. Pork-chops sending the blood of mercy coursing out of strong hearts, filling arteries with the stuff of sacrifice.

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Down cable, thirty fathoms to the ocean floor, and the red ship swings at anchor in a full sea-way five miles off the Diamond Shoal.

Fifteen men shut in a gaudy ship, mocking the winds, eyeing into the squalls, double glading the night waves with twin mast-moons, clicking lights every three seconds against the ten second flash from the great black-banded tower on shore.

Fifteen men polishing brasses, tinkering machinery, sitting up at night to watch their star-beads wire and break over flowing water.

Fifteen men, grinding out silly tunes on a phonograph to lift the crush of hours, contriving cages for the singing birds which flap against the lanterns at night, playing chequers, reading old magazines.

Fifteen men anchored in the middle of the sea, so that ships may sail their ways in safety, and float their cargoes over deep water to the shore-lines of the earth.

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But the fog! Padding over the tops of greasy waves. The choking fog smoking the lantern-glasses, fouling the straight shoots of light.

Through the fog booms a great steam chime. It cuts the smooth muffle of mist, and sheers over the flat ooze of a rain-dead sea. Days on end it eats the life out of the nerves of fifteen men shut within so many feet of it.

And storms! Storms striking them against their anchor-tow, crowding upon them, spinning over them, beating the

lanterns to crackles, crashing driven vessels into their broadside, shrieking to them of the jeering, jangling shoal five miles to leeward of their hawse-pull, the under-creeping quicksands whose sucking mouths water green and purple waves in anticipation.

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In the morning
Rings of porpoises.
Bowed up,
Sprung,
Fallen,
Dipping under,
Shooting over and over,
Another and another.
Sharp blue water,
Sharp black fins,
Curving,
Cutting,
Over, down, under.
And then only hard, straight water,
With a four-masted schooner moving across it
Loaded with lumber from Maine
To make baskets for the grape-fruit which California ships back overland.

In the afternoon,
Long lines of barnacle geese
Afloat upon the water;
And a devil-fish swimming in a great curve,
Flinging up into the air with a demi-vault,
Sinking,
His white feelers raised like hands.

Purple, gold, and wine-colour,
The widgeons fly North in the Spring.
In the Autumn,
The black and white terns
Light upon the cross-bars of the wireless apparatus
To rest after the long journey Southward.

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Sailing ships lie upon the horizon for hours, moving as slowly as the sun moves, and steamers bound for Panama and Valparaiso fuss along under tongues of black smoke with binoculars trained on the weather-flags of the lightship.

But none stop.

The men holystoning the deck call to one another: "The United Fruit Steamer's on the starboard bow." "That old tub of a tramp is almost rail under, Texas cotton from Galveston. A good haul, if it doesn't sink her." "Here comes the Dago whaling-schooner. I have to hold my nose when she goes by." And so on.

Blue days, grey days. Rain opening from stripped clouds. Wind-flanges burst out of a glaring sky.

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Fifteen men aching for the lighthouse tender, perishing for the feel of gravel under their boot-soles, riding with the petrel on the humping backs of waves, while the geese fly North and South, and the Seasons change, wheeling full-ringed over and beyond into the vague blur of yesterday.

Fifteen men, priest dedicate with lantern and bell. A scarlet monastery held to a mushroom kedge. Tapers burning before a terrible altar.

Fifteen hearts to save a million bodies, with an anthem wheezed out on a phonograph, and a hundred black-headed gulls genuflecting, squealing the responses.

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Fishermen in flat-nosed dories rest on their oars and pass the time of day. And when the sun runs level to its reflection in the brass binnacle, they come back with their boats up to the thwarts in plates of emerald and silver, and shout the tally of quintal to the lightship as they jerk by:

Shad, blue fish, mackerel, fading from brilliance into the slow colours of a rainbow opposite a stripling moon.

A thousand deaths to feed a living energy. Fish to make men. Loss footing up a total balance.

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A shark streaks the golden water, arrows into the jar of fin-thick water.

A school of alewives scuttling out of the wide arc of scissor-jaws, flickering down under the smoothing water, leaving a large count to glut the forked, flashed arrow.

Food hungered for, aimed at, achieved.

The sea is long and sliding, only the oblique spout of a sperm whale jostles the horizontal tremour of the horizon. A lazy whale, full of cuttle-fish, lolling and fluking among round waves.

Life, death, and eating. The weather flags go up and down. Men and fishes kill without malice, for food.

The fifteen men eat the flesh of hogs and chickens. Without malice they snare the migrating rails who perch upon the rigging, and roast them for a titbit.

Without malice, and to cheat the whining sands.

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A grey belly, spawning men, snouts over the wide sea miles to the East.

Glittering and awash the back emerges, and a thin feeler defines itself against the layers of air.

Snout, snore, to the rotation of oil engines.

A worm guzzling for carrion. A fetid serpent writhing with pleasure at the picture of a red ship struck upon the obscene iris of its one eye.

Dirty eggs in an iron belly, swarming with mirth, cackling at the red ship.

Movement of spawn in a big belly, and the bow guns kick off the flying spray and glare back out of green water as the submarine pushes on to shore.

There are harpoons and fish-hooks on the red ship, but no guns.

The anchors grip the sand, the furnaces are cold.

Rot ripens quicker where there is no movement.

Clipped claws are pleasant fighting.

Women and children on the *Lusitania*, and now—anchored men!

Good hunting—a lightship with no guns.

Safe sport for a scientific nation! Oh! we honour you, you have ripped the cover from the world, and, beneath, the red hearts and the black lie quivering.

Out of dirt, disease; but it is dirt to us still, not corroding.

The sands cannot eat their prey, and you are cousin to the sands.

Slap the charge into the guns. Crack at the red ship. Splinter the skin of her, and curl upon yourselves with merriment as she sinks by the bow to the heavy wrench of her hawse-chain.

Call a chorus to the seeping shoals. Submerge to the tune of "*Deutschland über Alles.*" These men in an open boat above a gurgling graveyard are nothing. There will be steamers and barques later on; and inland, among the rising hills, women with still wombs weeping for their men.

Red hearts in a little boat, cockling over a rolling tide-way, cursing themselves hoarse, spitting oaths at a twinkling periscope.

Honk, Canada geese and buffle-headed duck.

The shoals you know, but this horror you do not know. Until now, it was not. Old age breeds maggots, the maggots of dying kings. Love rotted to lust. Heroism gangrening into murder. The sea-alleys turned into *cloacas* for the running of unclean worms.

But, in the high air, the wedges of birds still fly, and the lower winds stretch against the sterns of wheat-ships, troop-ships, steering East and West, veering away a point or two because the gulls are dropping, going straight when the gulls fly forward. Food and men, and to-morrow like a halo hanging over the muzzles of the guns.

AMY LOWELL.